The Asiatic Society

A Brief History

Moni Bagchee



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Death is sad. It is sadder when it comes to one who could give more of his talent to the society. It is saddest when he or she has been so close to us, has been with us through thick and thin. Our sadness is even more because with all the best will and efforts, we could not rush Moni Bagchee's work through the press soon enough for him to see his love's labour in the hands of all those who cherish the achievements of the Asiatic Society which has just celebrated its second centenery.

Moni Bagchee was born in Nabadwip, a great centre of learning and scholarship, in 1907. From the local school to the Bankura Mission College and then to Calcutta University, he moved on and, after graduation, he became sub-editor of ***Ananda Bazar Patrika*** at the age of 24 in 1931. He made his mark as an essayist and a satirist and he wielded a facile pen both in English and in Bengali.

Monida had a flair for writing biography, which remained his first and last love. His *Chotoder Bernard Shaw*, done initially in Bengali and then translated by him into English elicited Shaw's appreciation in a letter of 1950, in which he said "One day you will shine as a life writer..." And Shaw was right. Monida did about a hundred biographies of remarkable individuals of Bengal and of India. His *Sister Nivedita* won him Sir Jadunath Sarcar's appreciation. His *Jeevani Satak* (A hundred great lives of East and West) gained him wide acclaim.

His work on Radhakrishnan met with singular success. Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan awarded him the honour of National Biographer in the centenary year of Vandemataram. That was a fitting recognition. Monida was 75 when he began to work on Sir William Jone's *Discourses and Essays* and (the history of) *The Asiatic Society* in honour of its second centenery which was to take place two years later. He was that far-sighted and concerned about a heritage worth-preserving.

As soon as he finished editing *Discourses and Essays* and the history, Monida sent us both MSS. We knew he was old and ill—from his own letters. But we never suspected that an energetic person like him could be snatched away so quickly. On February 21, 1983 when he was 76, he passed away shaming us for not bringing out his works early enough for him.

Now his two works are published. That is poor consolation for us. And, we are poorer with the loss of yet another firm friend that is or was? Moni Bagchee.

I

The development of oriental studies and the evolution of an analytical methodology for historical investigation are all associated with the birth of the Asiatic Society which has celebrated its bi-centenary in 1984. On 15 January 1784, in a meeting of thirty leading European citizens of Calcutta, presided over by the Chief Justice Robert Chambers of the Supreme Court at Fort William in Bengal, Sir William Jones, a Puisne Judge, mooted the proposal of founding a Society for enquiring into the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia; and the meeting resolved to form a Society under the name of "The Asiatic Society". The institution which was thus founded proved to be the fountain head of all literary and scientific activities in India and the parent of all other Asiatic Societies in the world.

The following extracts from the inaugural address of Sir William Jones, are illuminating as indicating the aims of the Society of which he was the illustrious founder and also the first president :

"When I was at sea last August, on my voyage to this country, which I had long ardently desired to visit, I found one evening, on inspecting the observations of the day, that ***India***

lay before us, and *Persia* on our left whilst a breeze from *Arabia* blew nearly on our stern...It gave me inexpressible pleasure to find myself in the midst of so noble an amphitheatre, almost encircled by vast regions of Asia, which has ever been the esteemed nurse of sciences, the inventress of delightful and useful arts, the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the productions of human genius, abounding in natural wonders, and infinitely diversified in the forms of religion and government, in the laws, manners, customs and languages, as in the features and complexions of men. I could not help remarking, how important and extensive a field was yet unexplored, and how many solid advantages unimproved."

As such enquiries and improvements could only be made by the united efforts of many converging in a common point, he thought that if in any country or community such a union could be effected it was among his countrymen in Bengal; and his hopes were materialised in the foundation of the Asiatic Society. Regarding the scope of the investigations of the Society, Sir William Jones defined an ample space bounded by the geographical limits of Asia. Dilating on this point he said : "You will investigate whatever is rare in the stupendous fabric of Nature; you will correct the geography of Asia by new observations and discoveries, will trace the annals, and even traditions, of those nations, who from time to time have peopled or desolated it; and will bring to light their various forms of government, with their institutions, civil and religious; you will examine their improvements and methods in arithmatic, geometry, trignometry, mensuration, mechanics, optics, astronomy and general physics; their system of morality, grammar, rhetoric, dialectic; their skill in surgery and medicine, and their advancement, whatever it may be, in anatomy and chemistry. To this you will add researches into their agriculture, manufacture and trade; and, whilst you enquire into their music, architecture, painting and poetry, you will not neglect those inferior arts, by which comforts, and even elegances of social life are supplied or improved."

He further added, "if now it be asked what are the intended objects of our enquiries within these spacious limits, we answer Man and Nature; whatever is performed by the one or produced by the other." These memorable words have since been paraphrased in the aims and objects of the Society : "The bounds of its investigations will be the geographical limits of Asia, and within those limits its enquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by man or produced by nature."

Thus the idea of forming the Society was conceived by Sir William Jones (1746-94), who is now universally acclaimed as a great pioneer in the field of Oriental studies. He came to India equipped with something more than learning—with humility before the rich territory of ancient Indian civilisation, art and philosophy which was in his day opening for the first time to the West. Few who have succeeded him have grasped more completely the immense value of that territory of the human mind that is peculiar to the Indian civilisation. India owes a deep debt of gratitude to him and to the Society he founded. There is no other institution in India which can claim a longer service to the growth of modern knowledge in India. All universities, academic bodies and other institutions are of later growth. Besides, the Asiatic Society is an institution which Europe followed from India unlike other institutions in India which were founded following the European pattern.

On arriving in India, Sir William Jones soon noticed the want of an original association in Calcutta as a drawback to progress. He therefore felt "that, in the fluctuating, imperfect, and limited erudition of life such enquiries and improvements could only be made by the united efforts of many, who are not easily brought without some pressing inducement or strong impulse to converge in a common point." Accordingly, while he engaged himself in the study of Sanskrit language, which he had till then not acquired, he invited the cooperation of the leading men of the time in Calcutta for the formation of an institution where united action could be taken to promote the study of oriental literature and science, and where, by the co-operation of the many, the talents and abstract studies of the few would prove most effectual and derive the stimulus which emulation, publicity and a common interest never fail to exercise.

The exertions of this noble and visionary European were warmly seconded by his friends, and a meeting was held at the grand Jury Rooms of the Supreme Court on Thursday, the 15th of January 1784 to come to some definite resolution. Thirty gentlemen, it is on record, attended this memorable meeting, and they represented the *elite* of the European community in Calcutta at the time. The Chair was taken by Sir Robert Chambers, and the proceedings were opened by Sir William Jones himself, who delivered a learned and very suggestive "Discourse on the institution of a Society for enquiring into the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia." The address was enthusiastically received and a resolution was unanimously adopted for establishing the Society under the name of the "Asiatic Society". Warren Hastings, the then governor general, was at first offered the presidentship of the Society, but when he declined this offer due to heavy pressure of work, Jones, at the suggestion of Hastings himself, was unanimously requested to accept that offer. The governor general and members of his Council were elected patrons of the Society.

The gentlemen who took part at this meeting were: Sir Robert Chambers, Kt., Chief Justice, Supreme Court; Sir William Jones, Kt., Puisne Judge, Supreme Court; Mr Justice Hyde; General John Carnac; Lieutenant Colonel Henry Watson; David Anderson, Esq.; Henri Vansitart, Esq.; Charles Crafts, Esq.; William Chambers, Esq.; Richard Johnson, Esq.; John Shore, Esq.; Francis Gladwin, Esq.; Charles Chapman, Esq.; Nathaniel Middleton, Esq.; Major William Davy, Charles Wilkins, Esq. (afterwards knighted) Jonathan Duncan, Esq.; John Briston, Esq.; Captain Jonathan Scott; Francis Balfour, Esq.; Thomas Law, Esq.; Ralph Broome, Esq.; Burrish Crops, Esq.; Lieutenant James Anderson; Lieutenant Charles Hamilton; T. Renbon Burrow, Esq.; and George Hillarow, Esq. (afterwards made a Baronet).

Those thirty gentlemen who became the foundation Members of the Society were then, or subsequently became the leading officers of the English East India Company in this country and included among them all the principal contributors to the

pages of the Society's transactions. The name adopted for the Society at the inaugural meeting was borne on the records till the elose of the fourth decade of the last century. In 1829, soon after the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in London, and the affiliation of the Literary Society of Bombay with that institution a letter was received from the latter offering to the Calcutta Society the privilege of being affiliated and in this letter it was for the first time designated as "Asiatic Society of Bengal"; but the Society did not accept the change, vide its proceedings, January 1830. As the parent of all the Asiatic Societies extant, it retained its original name of the Asiatic Society. In March 1832, when Mr James Princep sought the sanction of the Society to use its name for the journal he was then about to start, the resolution adopted used the Words "Asiatic Society" only, but the editor deemed it convenient for his purposes to add a local designation and the Society took no notice of it. In 1843, when this journal became the property of the Society, the new name had already become familiar, and it was formally introduced in the code of bye-laws published in 1851.

II

Now let us look at the objects of the Society. In the terms of the original resolution, the object of the Society was "enquiry into the history and antiquities, arts, sciences and literature of Asia." The founder, dilating on this definition, made an elaborate remark which has already been discussed. To give emphasis to his elaboration, Sir William Jones added: "If now it be asked, what are the intended objects of our enquiries, we answer—MAN and NATURE; whatever performed by the one, or produced by the other." This has also been already mentioned, and this sentence now serves as the motto of the Society. It is in this unique motto that we find the entire history of mankind since the beginning of our civilisation fully reflected as it were though in a nutshell.

The story of the birth and gradual development of this august body is really fascinating. In his inaugural address the

founder expressed a strong feeling of disapprobation against an elaborate code of rules. "It may be advisable at first", he said, "in order to prevent any difference of sentiment on particular points not immediately before us, to establish but one rule, namely, to have no rules at all." He, however, qualified this by adding, "This only I mean, that, in the infancy of any society, there ought to be no confinement, no trouble, no expense, no unnecessary formality. Let us, if you please, for the present, have weekly evening meeting in this hall for the purpose of hearing original papers read on such subject as fall within our enquiries. Let all curious and learned men be invited to send their tracts to our Society, for which they ought immediately to receive our thanks; and if, towards the end of each year, we should be supplied with a sufficiency of valuable materials to fill a volume, let us present our Asiatic Miscellany to the literary world."

Another important utterance made by the founder-president, while delivering his inaugural address, is worth recollecting even at this distance of time. He said: "One thing only as essential to your dignity I recommend with earnestness—on no account to admit a new member who has not expressed a voluntary desire to become so; and in that case, you will not require, suppose, any other qualification than a love of knowledge and a zeal for the promotion of it." This has remained, it should be pointed out here, since then the criterion for the membership qualification of this learned body that paved the path of Indian renaissance in course of time. "A love of knowledge and a zeal for the promotion of it"—these words still ring true and are echoed through the corridors of time. Only a genius like Sir William Jones is capable of thinking in this way.

Here it should be mentioned that initially these suggestions were unanimously accepted as the rules of the Society and rigidly acted upon for several years. Thereafter in August 1796, the necessity having been felt for devising the best means to make the institution permanent. Some new rules were framed, and almost all the suggestions of the founder were converted into the form of rules and regulations. New rules were framed from time to time to meet the special occasions, but nothing like a regular code was adopted until the beginning of the second half of the last century. A new code of bye-laws was adopted after much deliberation on 5 January 1851. One important clause in the new code required that every candidate for admission as an ordinary member shall first address a letter stating that "he is anxious to promote the progress of science and literature, and is desirous of becoming a member of the Society."

In practice, however, this clause was found unworkable, and had soon to be rescinded. Other clauses were also found to be troublesome, and a general revision was called for in 1859. On the establishment of the *Indian Museum*, the altered circumstances of the Society requiring extensive changes in the rules, a new code was adopted in the same year. This had again to be recast in 1876, and the last is the one now in force, with a few amendments since adopted. We further gather from the proceedings of the Society during its formative period that for the first eleven years of its existence, that is during the life time of its illustrious founder, the members, at least most of them, were not very much particular about rules and codes; all that mattered with them was the gradual development of the learned body on the basis of mutual cooperation and collaboration of those who are associated with it, fully inspired with the ideals of Sir William Jones.

Membership of the Society, it should be pointed out here, remained for many years exclusively European. Indian members being admitted for the first time in January 1829, on the proposal of Dr Horace Hayman Wilson. The earliest Indian members of the Society included such persons as Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Dwarkanath Tagore, Siva Chandra Das, Rasamay Dutt and Ramkamal Sen.[1] True when this august body came into being, it was not expected that Indians would join it. But the founder knew it for certain that a day would come when the sons of the soil would not remain aloof from it and this is why he once said to the members; "whether you will enrol as members any number of learned natives you will hereafter decide". But the question was not mooted for many years afterwards

1. Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, dated 7th January 1829.

until the proposal of Dr Wilson. Similar propositions were subsequently made from time to time, and duly adopted. In the Code of Rules now in force, it is laid down that "persons of all nations shall be eligible as members of the Society".

III

For twenty years since its foundation in 1784, the Society had no house of its own. The meetings were held in the Grand Jury Room of the old Supreme Court. After the death of the founder in 1794, some inconvenience was felt in this respect. Besides, books, papers, records, etc., had accumulated and required a permanent accommodation.

The idea of building a suitable house for the Society was first mooted in 1796, when the Society made an application to the government for the grant of a free site to build a house of its own and resolved that the new ordinary members should pay a quarterly subscription of one gold mohur each and entrance fee of two gold mohurs. While the old members were required to make up for their previous memberships by a payment of two gold mohurs in lieu of the entrance fee which all new members were called upon to contribute. The fund had to be raised thus by subscription. The rule regarding the quarterly subscriptions was altered in 1859, when the amount was reduced to Rs. 12 a quarter for resident members, and Rs 6 for non-residents.

In 1803 the government granted a plot of land at the corner of the Park Street with the exception of a small portion on the western side, which was also made over to the Society by the government in 1849. The building, undertaken in 1805 on a plan prepared by Captain Lock of the Bengal Engineers, was completed in 1808. This historic building is now more than 170 years old. With the turn of the present century the accommodation in the old building was felt to be inadequate for the growing needs of the Society. The question of erecting a new building had been coming up for consideration from time to time but it did not materialise chiefly due to difficulty in arranging adequate funds.

The Society at last decided on the erection of a nine-storied building on Society's own land at 1-A Park Street, on a plan prepared by the well known firm of architecture Messers Ballardie Thompson & Mathews. With the generosity of the government of India and also the state government, the construction started in 1961, the foundation stone of which was laid by Professor Humayun Kabir, the then education minister of the government of India, on 7 November 1959. On completion of four storey the doors of the new building were formally opened by Dr S. Radha Krishnan, the then president of India, on 22 February 1965. On this memorable occasion he observed :

"Whether it is the consciousness of the responsibility of Government or the urge for evangelism or the spirit of exploration, enquiry, widening one's horizon by bursting the bonds of one's own limited culture or the pure joy of contemplating the wonderous works of man under the distant skies, whatever be the motive, we owe to those English pioneers who took Asian studies, an immense debt of gratitude not only for their impressive achievements, but for the impulse they gave to the study of our past...The universality of interest which this Society has acquired is obvious from the fact that it counts among its precious possession a large number of Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu manuscripts as well as European classics. Despite all differences of colour, race, religion, climate, there is a deep affinity of mind and spirit between the East and West which transcends all variations. If we are to shape a community of spirit among the peoples of the world which is truly essential for a truly human society, we must forge bonds of international understanding, this can be achieved by an acquaintance with the masterpieces of literature, art and science produced in different countries. An affectionate regard for the past and an imaginative understanding in the life of other times gives us a sense of perspective, an equipoise which is so essential in times of tension."

Were the founder of the Asiatic Society, we can conjecture, alive at that time, he would have been the happiest man to hear such fine words from the lips of one who reckoned nothing

that is not human and who, like Sir William Jones, thought and worked all through his life for the East-West fraternity.

The Asiatic Society has always laboured under a double disadvantage. Initially neither Europeans nor Indians were attracted to this Institution for various reasons. Few of them devoted their time to literary and scientific pursuits. But as Milton remarks : "No man who hath tasted learning but will confess the many ways of profiting by those who, not contented with stale receipts, are able to manage and set forth new positions to the world", and the highly educated Englishmen, who came out in the civil, the medical and the military services of the East India Company, fully bore out the truth of this observation. It is on record that notwithstanding heavy duties t ey had to discharge in their respective spheres, many of them contributed largely to the efficiency, the stability and the advancement of the Society by their literary labours and scientific researches. Educated Indians, too, who were the members of the Indian Civil Service since the second half of the last century evinced their interest in the affairs of the Society and one of the earliest of them, R. C. Dutt, was a prominent Indian member of the Society where he read some interesting papers relating to the ancient Indian civilisation. Among the Indians of his time, Dutt, it should be noted here, was perhaps the pioneer to undertake the study of this subject so long neglected by his own people.

IV

A Few words about the steady growth of the Society may not be out of place here. Commencing with a total of thirty names the number of members rose, at the close of 1778 to eighty nine, and in 1876 when the subscription of resident members was brought down to nine rupees per quarter, to 285. We gather from the records that the rolls of the Society included in course of time many European servants who distinguished themselves mostly by their oriental scholarship as also two renowned Indian scholars—Sir Radhakanta Dev and Professor Bopdeva Shastri. The associate membership of the Society came

into being on 6 May 1835, to secure the cooperation of distinguished persons in India, who would not offer themselves as candidates for ordinary membership. The associate members enjoy all the privileges of ordinary members except that of voting at the meeting of the Society.

Sir William Jones was elected the President of the Society on February 1784. He held the office till his demise on 27 April 1794. He died in Calcutta and was buried the following morning with all solemnity. The burial procession according to an eye-witness "preceded by all the European troops in garrisons, with arms reversed, drums muffled, and the artillery band playing sacred music while minute guns were fired from the ramparts of Fort William. Even the pundits who were in the habit of attending him joined the funeral procession with tearful eyes."[2]

On the death of the founder, the office of president of this august body was held by Sir John Shore, the then governor general of India. Some inconvenience was felt owing to his inability to attend every meeting of the Society, and in 1796 a resolution was adopted to appoint two vice-presidents. The number was afterwards raised to three, and subsquently to four but by the rules now in force it is limited to three.

Soon after its establishment, the Society appointed a Committee, consisting of the president, the secretary and four other members, to conduct its affairs. In November 1796, the Committee was strengthened by the addition of two vice-presidents, and four other members, and in 1849, another addition was made, bringing up the total to fifteen including the office-bearers. Under the rules now in force, the minimum was fixed at fifteen and the maximum at twenty. The Committee was afterwards designated as the Council, as the governing body of the Society.

Although the Society was established with a view to hold weekly meetings for exchange of notes among the members and reading of papers on interesting subjects, the necessity

2. Memoirs of the Life Writings and Correspondence of Sir William Jones by Lord Teignmouth (Sir John Shore).

soon arose for appointing special committees for the consideration of questions of importance, consequently there came into existence two such committees, viz. 1. The Committee for Natural History, Philosophy Medicine, Improvements of the Arts and Physics; and 2. The Committee for Literature, Philosophy, History, Antiquities—the former being termed as Physical Committee while the latter as Literary Committee. Necessary rules were framed for the conduct of their investigations. Thus the transactions of the Society were divided into two parts—one to be devoted to physical and the other to literary subjects. An Historical Committee and a Coin Committee have since been added.

As already stated, since its foundation and during the presidency of Sir William Jones, no necessity was felt for a house exclusively for the Society. The Grand Jury Room of the late Supreme Court was always accessible for the meetings of the Society, and there being no office, no efforts and no establishment, no separate accommodation was so long required. On the demise of the founder, the case became different. The court-room was not always so readily available; books, papers, records and specimens of various kinds had accumulated, and they required a store-room, and a natural desire to secure permanency for these suggested the necessity of a local habitation. It was accordingly resolved (vide Proceedings for 1 December 1796) that an application should be made to the government for the grant of a free site for constructing a house and the members should pay a quarterly subscription of one gold mohur each and an entrance fee of two mohurs, which, accumulating for a few years, would yield a sufficient sum to cover the expense of building the house. There is no record to show what reply was given by the government to this application. A second application was made, on 4 July, 1804, for a spot of land at the corner of Park street, covering an area of a little over three bighas and a half. The government gave the land free of all conditions.

In 1805, when the order of the government granting the land was received, the Society has accumulated a sufficient sum to be in a position to undertake the building of a house of its own. Captain Lock, of the Bengal Engineers, designed a plan, which, after some modifications, was made over to one Jean Jacques Pichor, a French man, settled in Calcutta, to erect the building. The contract with the builder bears the date 1st February, 1806, and the cost settled was Rs. 24,000. It appears from subsequent proceedings (6th April, 1808), that the contract amount had to be raised to Rs. 30.000. Extensive addition and alterations had to be made at a heavy cost during the first century of the Society's existence. The Society took possession of the house at the beginning of 1808. Here it should be mentioned that although built at the cost, and for the exclusive use, of the Society the house has been always accessible to the public for literary and scientific lectures.

In 1822, the use of the meeting room was permitted to the Serampore Missionaries for a course of lectures on Phraseology and the Medical and Physical Society of Calcutta held their meetings and had their office and library in the Society's house for upwards of thirty years.

One of the objects for which the house was built was to provide accommodation for a library and a Museum. It is on record that since its foundation, books, papers, manuscripts, drawings, copper plates and other articles were from time to time, presented to the Society, and they had to be kept, owing to want of a better place for their preservation, in the private dwelling house of the secretary for the time being and as the exigencies of European official life in the country led to frequent changes, the risk of loss was serious. The new house at once removed the difficulty.

The books that had been received up to the year 1808, formed the nucleus of a library, and funds were sanctioned every

year, and also on special occasions, for the purchase of new books. An agent was also appointed in London to select and purchase books for the Society. Exchange of publications were also made with leading European Societies and of duplicates in the library with private individuals, and members retiring from the country sometimes preserved selections from their private collections. A small but very valuable collection of works on art was given by Mr Home, who was for several years a leading member of the Society. A much larger collection of historical and other works relating to India was donated to the Society by the government on the abolition of the old college of Fort William as an educational institution. A very valuable collection of manuscripts, being diverse occasional papers and essays, and ten volumes of drawings of antiquarian and archaeological subjects, belonging to colonel Mackenzie, for a long time surveyor general of India, were received in December 1827.

To facilitate the use of the library by members a set of rules was framed in January 1820, and the first catalogue of the whole of the Society's library was published in 1823 that is four decades after the Society was founded. It showed then a total of about thousand volumes. A third catalogue prepared in 1856 by Rajendra Lal Mitra, showed the total to upwards of 7000 volumes. Accessions to the library has since been very numerous and valuable, comprising nearly all standard works of reference in science and oriental literature The total during this period exceeded twenty-thousand volumes, and it was acknowledged at that time that the Society's collection was extensive and valuable—perhaps the richest in India.

A few words should be mentioned here in regard to the Oriental Department of the Society's library, now known as the "Oriental Library". This department grew mainly from casual gifts from the members. The first accession of any importance was a gift from Seringapatnam Prize Committee (February 1808). It included a selection from the Library taken in *loot* from the palaces of Tipu Sultan. There were among them many old and rare works, including a great number of beautifully illuminated manuscripts of Quran. An exceedingly well-written

old text of the Gulistan said to be the first copy from the original manuscript of the illustrious author, and a codex of the *Padshanamah* being an autograph of the Emperor Shahjehan, were among them.

On the abolition of the College of Fort William, the whole of its Sanskrit, Arabian, Persian and Urdu works, mostly in manuscript, collected at great expense and trouble under the superintendence of Gladwin, Carey, Gilchrist and other distinguished oriental scholars, were placed under the custody of the Society. The catalogues of the Oriental Library were prepared mostly by the maulavis and pandits in the Indian style, and are not very convenient for reference now. The Sanskrit catalogue issued in 1838, included besides Sanskrit, a few Magadhi, Bengali, Hindi, Cannada, Telugu and Marathi names. Sir Jadunath Sarkar, when he was the president of the Society, had once suggested at a meeting of the Council for preparing fresh catalogues of the Oriental Library on modern method so as to enable the researchers to utilise it much to their benefit. He also described the entire collection as "unique and valuable".

In addition to the above, the Society possessed a rare collection of Tibetan Xylographs, including one complete and another somewhat defective, set of Khangyur and Stangyur texts of the Buddhist scriptures. There is also a very large and exceedingly valuable collections of Sanskrit Budhist manuscripts. The Society, it is on record, is indebted to one Mr B.H. Hodgson for both these collections. The Society has also, in its library, upwards of 350 Chinese Xylographs of which there is, in manuscript, a descriptive catalogue prepared by Mr. Albecter, the author of a life of Buddha, published under the name of *The Wheel of the Law* (meaning *Dhammachakra*). There are, likewise, palmleaf manuscripts of Burmese, Siamese, Javanese and Singalese works to the extent of about 125 bundles, of which, however, there is no inventory of any kind.

When the Society completed the first hundred years of its glorious existence, it drew admiration from Bhandarkar, the

reputed Orientalist in the following words : "Had the Society done nothing else in the course of a hundred year, this collection would suffice to secure to it the thanks of future generation. Truely so Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the great linguist and a former president of the Society, once remarked to the writer of this brief note : "It is unfortunate that the rich, rare and varied collection of the Oriental Library, has never been fully utilised. Scholars capable of doing this are rare nowaday." Truly so.

V

Inscriptions and coins are closely related to books and manuscripts; they differ only in the material in which they are presented and preserved, but are fully as valuable as recorded history, and at times much more, being far more authentic. Their development has engaged the attention of the Society from a very early date, and some of the most brilliant discoveries in Indian history have been thereby made. Records of this description are not plentiful; many exist on scarps of rocks and on ancient buildings or sculpture; others occur on stones not easily removable, while records on copper-plates are titledeeds which their owners do not part with, while coins are intrinsically so valuable that they are not readily to be had, the members of the Society have, we gather from old records been assiduous in their endeavours to obtain them either in the original or in fascimile, and a great number has been collected.

Of inscriptions the Society had at one time upwards of a hundred on the removal, however, of the Society's collection of antiquities from its premises to the Indian Museum, it was deemed expedient to make over all inscribed stones to the Museum, leaving behind in the library only the records mostly land grants on copper-plates.

Coins in Gold and Silver, when they cease to be current, are soon melted down, and in India, where the practice of wearing ornaments of precious metal is so universally prevalent, the cause of their destruction is constantly at work, while copper coins are not much cared for, and their material is subject to rapid deterioration by the influence of climate. It is not remarkable, therefore, that the Society was never very rich in this description of relics. Many were exhibited at the meetings, and many more described in the transactions of the Society, but few were given to it. Nevertheless, from time to time, a few coins were presented to it by various benefactors; and after the death of Colonel Mackanzie, duplicates of such coins as they existed in any number in his very large collection, were received through the liberality of the government of Bengal. These made up the Society's collection of coins in 1832, when they were noticed by Professor H H. Wilson in the *Asiatic Researches*.

Subsequently a great many coins were received at different times. The proceedings of 1843 refer to an imperfect inventory of the collection published by Dr Roer : "The cabinet, as described by Roer, consisted at that time 297 Roman coins from Augustus down to the destruction of the accidental Empire, mostly copper, and only a very few rare coins; of Greek coins there were 16; and of Bactrian, Indo-Scythian, Sassanian and Gupta coins only 116. There were the time, however, two or three bags full of copper coins, which had not been opened. A little later in the same year, it received a considerable addition of Norwaegian coins."

The Society purchased the well-known and magnificent collection of the colonel Stacy, which had been offered to it for sale at the reduced sum of Rs 4000, in November 1856. Since then many additions have been made from year to year, some by presentations, but mostly by purchase. We gather from the catalogue of the cabinet prepared during this time that among the Society's collection there were coins of Delhi Pathans and Bengal Pathans, as also the various sorts of ancient Hindu and Buddhist. There are also in the Society's collection of a few coins which are unique and not inconsiderable number which are more or less rare.

The Society has, moreover, a small but very valuable collection of oil painting and some busts, the latter being memorials of the many great men, whose labours contributed so largely to establish and sustain the renown of the Society. Many of the paintings are also memorials, which the members secured of their distinguished collaborators; the others are for miscellaneous character, and most of them at times belonged at one time to the studio of Mr Home. That gentleman was an artist, and at the beginning of this century lived for several years in Calcutta, and took an active interest in the affairs of the Society. During his tour in Europe, he collected many rare pictures, and on his death they were donated to the Society by his two sons. Among them there were originals by Ruben, Guido Rene, Domenichino, Reynolds and other reputed artists of the time. The society has received from other sources originals by Chinery, Poe and Daniel. All the paintings, it may be stated here, are in satisfactory state of preservation.

The Asiatic Society has had the germs of a national Museum as it were planted in its bosom almost about from the time it came into being. In the inaugural address of the founder no reference was made to a Museum; but curiosities were sent in from time to time by mofussil members, and in 1796 the idea was started of having a suitable house for their reception and preservation. Nothing practical, however, could be done at the time, and it was not until sometimes after the completion of house that measures were taken to carry out the object. On 2 February, 1814, Dr N. Wallich, the reputed Danish botanist, wrote a letter to the Society strongly advocating the formation of a Museum, and offering at the same time not only duplicates from his own rich collection to form a nucleus for it, but his own service also to look after it. The Committee of Papers, in bringing the letter to the Society, submitted the following notes:

"A collection of the substances which are the objects of science and of those reliques which illustrate ancient times and

manners has always been one of the first steps taken by societies for dissemination of specific or universal knowledge. Such a collection was one of the first objects also of the Asiatic Society, and any person engaged in the study of history and language of this country, or in the investigation of its natural productions, must have had frequent cause for regretting that such a purpose should have been hitherto so very incompletely carried into effect. No public repository yet exists to which the naturalist or scholar can refer, and the only sources of information beyond verbal and often inaccurate description, have been found in the accidental accumulation of individuals, always of difficult access, indiscriminate selection, temporary and little utility."

The committee added further in its note: The Asiatic Society is now called upon to adopt active measures for remedying the deficiency, and collecting from the abundant matter which India offers, a museum that shall be serviceable to history and science. In the former of these departments the Society is already in possession of several articles, and there can be no doubt that enquiry and exertion, and the assurance of their being properly bestowed, would soon add considerably to the number. There are, however, many things of extremely easy attainment, that would afford much useful illustration, and the student of the original languages and compositions would be frequently extricated from perplexity and doubt by having it in his power refer to specimens of various eastern implements and instruments in daily and domestic use amongst the nations of this region.

"It is, however, in the departments of science that a Museum in this country would be found most specially serviceable, and the facility of its accumulation is proportionable to the extent of its utility. In Natural History, Botany, Anatomy, Chemistry, Minoralogy and other branches a collection would accumulate rapidly if once commenced; and from the first moments of its accumulation would furnish additional matter to the stock of knowledge.

"The importance of the measure is, however, so obvious, that it must be unnecessary to urge it further, and it only re-

mains to consider the means by which it can be effected. The Society possesses accommodation fit for the purpose, and the expenses of adapting these to the reception of contributions could not be any amount. The present establishment might perhaps be sufficient to take charge of it, at least for sometime, and at any rate no great addition could be requisite. The principal difficulty lies in the selection of a person willing and able to devote some time and trouble to procuring and arranging the materials of which such a Museum should consist, and the removal of this difficulty is chief inducement at present for the Society to take the subject into serious consideration.

"Dr. Wallich offers, if the Society should determine to place the collection under his superintendence, to contribute to it the results of his own enquiries, to appropriate to it such further contribution as come within his reach, and to devote all the attention in his power to the arrangement and conservation of the whole."

After a careful consideration of the details submitted by the Committee of Papers, the Society came to the following resolutions :

"Resolved accordingly that the Asiatic Society determine upon forming a Museum for the reception of all articles that may tend to illustrate oriental manners and history, or to illucidate the peculiarities of art or nature in the East.

"That this intention be made known to the public, and that contributions be solicited of the undermentioned nature :

1. Inscription on stone or brass; 2. Ancient monuments, Hindu or Muhammedan; 3. Figures of the Hindu deities; 4. Ancient coins and manuscripts; 5. Instruments of war peculiar to the East; 6. Instruments of music; 7. Implements of native art and manufacture; 8. Skeletons or particular bones of animals peculiar to India; 9. Birds peculiar to India, stuffed or preserved; 10. Ores of metals and minerals of any description.

"That the Hall of the ground floor be fitted up for the reception of the articles that may be procured".

From the old records of the Society we gather that the Indian Museum of Calcutta which came into being by the Act of 1866 thrived rapidly under Dr Wallich who was appointed Honorary curator or superintendent of the Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society, which in its wake laid the solid foundation of a new branch of knowledge in India, viz; Museology. Thus the Asiatic Society founded by Sir William Jones opened up for the people of India a new chapter in the Science of Man—that of Museology.

VI

Now a few words about the publications of the Society. Although the founder contemplated the publication of a volume of *Asiatic Miscellany* every year, no attempt was made to get out such a periodical during the first three years of the Society's career. Most of the papers received during the first year were short and unimportant, and it was not until the middle of the year 1787 that the Society was in a position to go to press with the first volume of its transactions. The Society, however, had no funds of its own at the time, and there was no publisher in Calcutta who could undertake the work at his own responsibility. Ultimately one Mr Manual Cantopher, of the Hon'ble East India Company's Printing office, undertook the job as a private speculation, on the understanding that every member of the Society would take the book at Rs. 20 a copy. The name then approved for the periodical was *Asiatic Researches* instead of what the founder had originally suggested. The first volume appeared in 1788 and the second two years after. The third, the fourth, and the fifth volumes appeared successively in 1793, 1795 and 1797, under the same conditions, the price being reduced to Rs. 16 per copy.

The publication, we gather from the contemporary records, created quite a sensation in the literary world, and the demand for it was so great, that a printed edition was brought out in England in 1798. This also sold so rapidly that, within the

next five or six years, two other editions were brought out in octavo. The demand for the work was also urgent on the continent, and a French translation was brought out in Paris under the title of *Recherches Asiatiques*. The translation was a faithful one and the estimation in which the work was then held was high.

In 1837, Mr James Princep brought out a very carefully pre pared analytical index of the first eighteen volumes of the *Researches*. This was a valuable acquisition, as it made the rich treasure of the Society's transactions readily accessible to students. It did not suffice, however, to revive public interest in the valuable but tardily issued publication; and soon after the completion of the second part of the twentieth volume of the *Researches* in 1839, the work was finally abandoned. The causes which contributed to the stoppage of this once popular and highly esteemed periodical were manifest. The first and foremost was the tardiness of the publication. From the foundation of the Society in 1784 to the close of 1839, within a period of fiftyfive years, the Society published only twenty volumes, or one volume at an average in every two years and nine months. In many instances the interval, as the records show, was greater. Another frequent complaint was the form of the *Researches*.

The journal came into existence in March 1832. It bore the name of *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. In fact, we gather from the contemporary accounts Captain James D. Herberts (a deputy surgeon-general in the Company's service) monthly publication *Gleanings in Science* which came out in 1829 was the predecessor of the journal and its character was entirely changed instead of being a periodical, it became essentially literary. The frequency and regularity with which this journal appeared recommended it strongly to the notice of the authors, and many papers which would have been otherwise reserved for the page of the Researches found their way into the journal.

Mr James Princep, FRS, who was then holding the post of the secretary of the Physical class of the Society, became the editor of the journal. The title page of the first issue

carried this quotation from the pen of the founder : "It will flourish, if naturalists, chemists, antiquarians, philologers and men of science in different parts of Asia will commit their observations to writing, and send them to the Asiatic Society at Calcutta; it will languish, if such communications shall be long intermitted; and it will die away if they shall entirely cease." Fortunately for us, the Asiatic was neither destined to languish, nor to die; on the contrary, it has steadily flourished through arduous and unremitting labour, thus fulfilling the cherished dream of the founder.

In the Preface to the first issue, the Editor wrote : "The Asiatic Society on the 7th March, 1852, passed a resolution that the monthly journal hitherto published under the name of *Gleanings in Science*, should be permitted to assume that of *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, and to continue it as long as the publication remains under the charge of one or both of the Secretaries of the Society. This privilege has, as it was anticipated, been the means of extending very considerably its circulation, while it has given a character and authenticity to the work, which no anonymous magazine, however well conducted, could hope to command. As an organ of Indian Scientific intelligence, the journal most obviously derive its only merit among the many similar periodicals of the present day, from its stores of Oriental literary and physical research, it will be generally acknowledged, that the first object of the work should be to give publicity to such oriental matter as the antiquarian, the linguist, the traveller, and the naturalist may glean, in the ample field open to their industry in this part of the world."

Explaining the scope of the journal, the editor remarked in the concluding paragraph of the Preface :

"The scope and object of the publication embraces the literature, the manners, the geography, physical and mineral, the arts, the natural productions of Asia, the Phenomena of its climate, and observations of the heavens." The Preface very appropriately ends with the famous words of the illustrious

founder of the Asiatic Society : "the bounds of its investigation will be the geographical limits of Asia, and within these limits its inquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by man or produced by nature."

The journal thus established naturally superceded the *Researches*, which was finally abandoned. In course of time the Society recognised the journal as its official organ, and the Committee of Papers had to be invested with the duty of editing. Since 1837 its bulk had become so heavy that the annual value had to be divided into two parts, and it was so kept up till 1845. In the following year grave financial difficulties rendered it necessary to reduce its size to the bulk of one part only. From the next year the two parts were again regularly published till the middle of the nineteenth century. The Society's resources were, however, taking into consideration its other responsibilities never equal to so large a publication, and the size of the journal was accordingly again reduced to one part.

This arrangement gave rise to a new inconvenience. The precis of the Society's proceedings, which had been hitherto published regularly every month, could not be often issued than once in every two or three months, and it became a frequent matter of complaint. The obvious course in the case was to separate the proceedings from the body of the journal, and this was done in 1865. The value of the new series was also enhanced by inserting into it short notes which were not deemed fit for inclusion into the journal, but which were, nonetheless, of sufficient interest to be worthy of publication.

The most frequent contributors to the journal have been Mr J. Princep, Mr B. H. Hodgson, Colonel P. T. Cautley, Mr E. Blyth, Mr H. Piddington, Dr H. Falconer, Dr G. G. Spilsbury, Dr J. Campbell, General A. Cunningham, Colonel R. Everest, Major M. Kitloe, Captain Hutton, Captain J. W. Sherwill, Colonel J. Abott, Captain J. Newhold, Mr H. N. Blanford, Mr W. T. Blanford, Dr R. Mitra (Rajendralal Mitra), Mr Woodmason and Mr H. Blochmann.

During the first hundred years of its existence, the society has published eighty-four volumes of the journal, and nineteen volumes of the proceedings. These 103 volumes represent a total of 50,000 pages of closely printed matter replete with innumerable essays, papers, monographs and notes of great interest. From the subject, nature and value of the papers published in these two volumes, it can be observed that they have contributed greatly to enhance the reputation of this august body—thus fulfilling the dreams of its founder whose sole preoccupation was the Society since he came to India.

VII

Though actively engaged in the translations of oriental works into English language, Sir William Jones seems to have entertained no idea of the Asiatic Society immediately taking up the task of printing Oriental texts, or of translating them; and it was not until several years afterwards that the subject was mooted. The proposition came from the Brethren of the Baptist Mission at Serampore, who offered to undertake, under certain conditions, the publication of a series of Sanskrit works with translation, and the Society, on the recommendation of the Committee of Papers, agreed to give the Missionaries the aid required, the patronage being limited at the time to a single work to be selected by a committee appointed for the purpose. The first publication of the Society was the *Ramayona* and the second book was the text of the *Sankhya*.

It was not however, until 1835, that any systematic attempt was made for the publication of oriental works and the petition of the Society to the Court of Directors was at first coldly received; but through the exertions of professor H. H. Wilson then the London Agent of the Society, and of the president and other influential members of the Royal Asiatic Society, a grant of Rs. 500 per mensem was ultimately sanctioned. The following extract from the Court's despatch will show the terms on which the grant was made. Writing to the Government of India, the court said: "Although the works formerly published

may not always have been selected in the most judicious manner, we are still of opinion that the publication of works—and works on instruction in the Eastern languages—should not be abandoned; we therefore authorise you to devote a sum, not exceeding five hundred rupees a month, to the preparation and publication of such works, either through the members of the Asiatic Society, or any equally appropriate channel."

This is how came into being the *Bibliotheca Indiea*, the Society's monthly serial of oriental publications. The work was taken in hand at the beginning of 1848. Dr Roer was appointed the Chief Editor on a monthly salary of Rs. 100, aided by a staff of Pundits. The first work selected was the *Samhita* of the Rig Veda, but before a small portion could be published, news arrived that the Court of Directors had made arrangement with Max Muller for the publication of that work, together with an English translation by Dr H. H. Wilson, and the Society's project had, therefore, to be abandoned. Dr Roer then took up the publication of the Upanishads and some other works. Among the earlier translators of the Society's oriental series we find such names as Dr Sprenger,, Dr Ballantyne, Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and few others whose names have now gone into oblivion. It was mainly at their suggestion that several valuable works were taken in hand. The publications were carried on with great spirit and energy, soon outstripping the limit imposed by the amount of the grant and in five years it became necessary to put a stop to the issue of *Bibliotheca* in order to pay arrears. The total number of oriental works published by the Society up to the period of its one hundred years of existence was 140. Of these, one hundred and eleven were published in the *Bibliotheca Indica*.

The Sanskrit series included the leading works of almost all the departments of Brahmanic literature. The Vedas are represented by twenty-five different works, the Puranas, by three; the philosophical schools by the textbooks of all the leading systems and several commentaries; the Yatishah (Astrology), by three, two with translations. The law books, the ritual of the Vedas, grammars, rhetoric and their branches

have also been represented by important works. It is doubtful in any Society in Europe has, within fifty years, done for any classic literature as much as Asiatic Society has done for Sanskrit literature since 1847. It may not be out of place here to point out that this gigantic effort alone had then paved the path to Indian renaissance to considerable extent which has been admitted by scholars like Cowell, Bhandarkar, Haraprasad Sastri and others. And what is more, this work alone has given the Society the highest claim to the consideration and respect of the people of this country and of oriental scholars in all parts of the world. The credit for the Sanskrit series is due to several scholars, viz, Dr E. Roer, Dr Fitz Edward Hall, Dr Ballantyne, Dr E. B. Cowell, Pandit Jaynarayan Tarkapanchanan, Pandit Bharat Chandra Siromoni, Pandit Mahendra Nayaratna, Pandit Satyabrata Samasrami, Dr Rajendralal Mitra and Dr Hoennle. Rajendralal Mitra alone edited as many as 83 volumes—an Herculean task indeed.

As a preliminary to the publication of Sanskrit work it was at the beginning of the last century, deemed expedient to collect information regarding the nature, extent and character of Sanskrit manuscripts extant in this country. Dr Farquhar accordingly proposed, on 5 October 1803, that "the Society immediately adopt some efficient steps to procure a catalogue of all the most useful Indian works now in existence, with an abstract of their contents. A petition was submitted to government in July 1807 praying an annual grant of five to six thousand rupees to carry out the object. Mr. Colebrooke, then president of the Society, urged the following argument in support of the prayer :

"The utility of such a catalogue is obvious. It would assist the researcher of learned men, directing them to the books likely to afford information which they may require, it would promote the studies of oriental scholars, guiding them to the selection of books most deserving of their notice; and on many points, it would furnish to the literary world as much information as is needed in particular branches of Indian knowledge.

"A catalogue, prepared according to the views of the Asiatic Society, would not only indicate the subject and the scope of every valuable book, but would contain extracts of the most curious or important passages in it, besides notices of various topics connected with the work itself, with the history of its author, or that of the sovereign in whose reign he lived, and with the manners and opinions presented at the period when he wrote."

Thus the need was felt by the members of the society to have a library of oriental manuscripts, accessible to the public. The main idea was to preserve the Asiatic knowledge, for the benefit of the researcher in the field of study. From all contemporary accounts we gather that the society, on every consideration, was desirous of forming a collection, as well as of obtaining detailed catalogue of manuscripts. But the funds of the Society were too limited for the undertaking, and it was felt by the council that the project had would have to be relinquished if adequate aid was not forthcoming.

It is on records that the government received the proposition very favourably, and strongly recommended it to the notice of the Court of Directors; but the Board of Central Instruction declined to make the grant, and consequently the project was dropped. Mr Princep, in 1837, revived the idea; and in the Sanskrit catalogue of the Society's library, inclined, by way of a first instalment, names of all the works contained in the libraries of the Calcutta, and Benaras Sanskrit Colleges. This however, did not meet the requirements of the case, and, in 1867, Pandit Radhakissen of Lahore, urged the adoption of a comprehensive scheme that would bring to light the treasure of Sanskrit lore buried in a private collections in India. Eventually a substantial amount of Rs. 3000 per annum was sanctioned by the government and the Asiatic Society was asked to superintendent its disbursement.

The task of preparing the first catalogue of the collection of the Sanskrit manuscripts was entrusted to Dr Rajendralal Mitra then librarian of the Society. In course of its existence during the first hundred years, the Society purchased Sanskrit manu-

scripts to the extent of 2057 codices. These are now preserved in the library of the Asiatic Society. The number has considerably increased since then.

Here it should be mentioned that the efforts of the society were not limited to the publication of certain oriental works, mainly literary. Scientific works also were taken in hand and a number of valuable books were published. It also superintendented the printing of scientific works for others. As instances, it may not be amiss here to cite the names of Colonel Dalton's magnificent work on the ***Ethnology of Bengal***, Colonel Mainwarring's ***Lepcha Grammar and Dictionary***, Mr Bedi's ***Biographical Dictionary***, and Mr Grierson's ***Grammar of the Northern Bihar Dialect***.[3]

A few words about the financial position of the Society during the first twelve years of its career may not be out of place here. During this formative period of the Society presented no income of any kind. Such small contingent expenses as were incurred in carrying on its affairs were defrayed either by the president, or by the secretary, or by both. When the rules regarding quarterly subscriptions were adopted in 1796, the great object was to accumulate a sufficient sum for the building of a house, and for sometime afterwards very little was spent for other purposes.

VIII

Let us conclude this brief history of the Society during the first hundred years of its existence by a short reference to the names of all those whose labours have created and sustained the

3. The year 1914 has remained memorable in the history of the Asiatic Society. It was in this year the first session of the Indian Science Congress was held in the Society's Hall under the presidency of Sir Ashuthosh Mukherjee. The Society was given the responsibility of the Congress for sometimes since its inauguration.

reputation of this august body. We are just referring here to a few of the most renowned scholars with whom the fame of the Society is intimately associated. Their names stand on the bed-rock of the Society, and as such are deserving of its highest respect.

1. The first and foremost name is that of Sir William Jones. To him the Society owes its foundation and the destination it attained in the initial days of its career. No less than 9 papers were contributed by him in the first four volumes of the *Asiatic Researches*, and his translation of *Manu* has been a standard text book of reference for lawyers in India. India can justly boast of him as her own son.

2. Sir John Shore, afterwards Lord Teignmouth, succeeded the founder as the Society's second president, and retired to England on May 1797. He contributed six papers to the *Researches*, but it was mainly through his exertions that this learned body prospered in its infancy. His name is intimately associated with the foundation of the Society, but he is best remembered by the people of this country as the virtual author of the Permanent Settlement of the land-revenue in Bengal, which was introduced during the time of Lord Cornwallis.

3. The name of Henry Thomas Colebrook (1765-1837), comes next. He came to India as a writer in the service of the East India Company, and for a long time held the office of the judge in the Sadar Dewani Adalat. He became the president of the Society in 1806 and held this high office for a decade, and contributed nineteen papers to the Transactions of the Society. On his retirement from India, he helped the Society as its London agent until the time of his demise. A great mathematician, astronomer and profound Sanskrit scholar, he wrote nothing that did not at once command the highest attention from the public, and notwithstanding the great advance that has been made in oriental researches of late years. Colebrook's papers are still looked upon as models of their kind. He was the founder of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, and contributed several valuable papers to its transactions.

4. Sir Charles Wilkins, Kt., LL.D. (1750—1836) came out to India as a writer in the East India Company's Civil Service, and devoted himself to the study of Sanskrit language. He was the first Englishman who acquired a thorough mastery of it, and in 1779 published a Grammar of that language. He likewise translated the ***Bhagavad Gita*** which was published in 1785 under the auspices of Warren Hastings. He was the first also to bring his profound learning to bear upon to Sanskrit paleography, and to decipher several inscriptions, which were unintelligible to the Pandits of his time. He was a scholar of unexampled perseverance, and his unremitting labour in the climate of Bengal forced him to retire from the service at the close of the seventeenth century. King George IV bestowed on him in recognition of his high literary merits, the honour of knighthood.

5. Samuel Davies, Esq., FRS, came to India as an officer of engineers in the Bengal presidency but was soon after admitted to the Civil Service of the East India Company. He joined the Society two months after its foundation, and contributed three papers to its transactions. He was a mathematician and astronomer, and to him is due the credit of having first identified, by actual observations in the company of pandits at Benaras, the asterisms and many of the stars noticed in Sanskrit works.

6. Colonel Francis Wilford was an enthusiastic supporter of the Society. He wrote ten elaborate essays on historical subjects, which created quite a sensation in his time. Unfortunately, however, the pandits on whom he relied for his quotations from Sanskrit works betrayed him, and his speculations, therefore, were subsequently found to be not very valuable.

7. Reuben Burron, Esq., a writer in the service of the Company was a distinguished mathematician and astronomer. He contributed eleven papers in connection with the mathematics and astronomy of the Hindus.

8. John Bentley, Esq., a writer in the Civil Service, distinguished himself by his researches into Hindu astronomy, for

which he deservedly acquired high distinction in Europe. His association with the society was fruitful.

9. Dr H. H. Wilson (1784–1860), who arrived at Calcutta in 1808, in the medical service of the East India Company became the deputy secretary to the Society on April 1811, and in two months was elected secretary, which office he held till 1832. In 1816, he was appointed Assay Master of the Calcutta Mint, which office he held to the last day of his sojourn in Calcutta. He first attracted public attention by an elegant translation of the *Meghadutam*, which was published in 1813. It was followed in rapid succession by other works, among It which his *Theatre of the Hindus* and the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* deserve special mention. As a visitor of the Sanskrit College of Calcutta, he superintended the publication of a large number of Sanskrit books, and with the assistance of the native staff, had the bulk of eighteen puranas translated into English, from out of which he selected the *Vishnupurana* for publication. Dr Wilson assumed the chair of Boden-Professor at Oxford when it was created in 1832. His name stands conspicuous on the roll of those whose genious and labour have contributed to enlighten the literary world on the early history and civilisation of the Hindu race. His connection with the Society extended over a quarter of a century, and during that period the stability and credit of this august body was fully established.

10. James Princep (1799-1844) was sent out as assistant to the Assay Master of Calcutta Mint, 1819. He was for several years the Assay Master of the Benaras Mint. In 1833, he succeeded Dr Wilson at the Calcutta Mint. During his stay at Benaras he published a large illustrated work on the temples of that holy city. He, likewise, contributed to the pages of the *Gleanings in Science*, of which he was for a time the editor, His bust now graces the Society's meeting room; and the public of Calcutta, in recognition of his services, erected near Fort William a magnificent bathing place to his memory. His services to the Asiatic Society form 1832 to 1838, have been the most brilliant and successful in the annals of the society.

11. Rev. W. H. Mill, D. D. came out in the ecelesiastical service of the East India Company, and for a long time held the post of Principal, Bishops College, Sibpur. His contributions to the *Journal* were not very numerous, but high enconium is due to his patience, perseverance and learning in deciphering the inscriptions on the Allahabad column in one of the oldest Indian characters. He was a profound scholar and universally held in high esteem. His bust adorns the hall of the Society.

12. Brien Houghton Esq., of Bengal Civil Services, came to India in 1899, and spent the greater part of his time in the Himalayas, holding for several years the office of Resident at the court of Kathmandu, Nepal. He utilised to the utmost the very favourable opportunities he had of carrying on his literary and scientific pursuits in a till then untrodden field, and the service he has rendered to the cause of science is immense. His contributions to the Society amount to a total of 112 papers, besides large donations in exceedingly valuable manuscripts associated with the progress of the Society.

Here it should be noted that since 1784, till 1852—all the high offices of the Society were occupied only by Englishmen most of whom were associated with the Company. It is in the year 1853 that a renowed "Young Bengal" Ramgopal Ghose was elected as one of the vice-presidents of the Society. He was twice re-elected as such in 1855 and 1858. The second Indian to be elected as a vice-president was Babu Ramprasad Roy, the youngest son of Raja Rammohun Roy, in 1859 and 1860.

The first Indian to be elected as one of the secretaries was Dr Rajendralal Mitra (1822-91), who had the longest association with the Asiatic Society since 1846, in various capacities. The learned institution with its rich treasure of books, manuscripts and atiquities and the inspiring band of devoted scholars, provided the young Rajendra with what he had been craving for all these years. He was indeed a product of the Society and a noted Indologist. In the words of Sir Charles Elliot, "He was an antiquarian par excellence." He served the Society in different responsible capacities, viz, as its secretary (1857, 1865)

as its vice president (1861-65, 1870-84) and (1886-91) and as president in 1885. The centenary volume of the Asiatic Society (1884) which he edited and prepared speaks highly of his outstanding talents and energy.

IX

Now a few words about the achievements of the Asiatic Society during its career of a hundred years. It fully carried out during this period the objects with which it was founded. The record of its services is brilliant. To mention only one aspect—it has published a total of 334 volumes including, 21 volumes of the *Asiatic Researches* with index, 19 volumes of proceedings, 167 volumes of oriental works of different kinds, 31 volumes of catalogues of various kinds, and 18 volumes of "Notices of Sanskrit Manuscripts".

The subjects which were set apart for the investigation of the literary section are "literature, philology, history, antiquities, religion, manners and customs, and whatever is comprehended under the general term of literature." Among these, history and antiquities are very closely connected with one another, the latter being subservient to a correct knowledge of the former. From the old records of the Society we gather that its activities during the early period of its career were carried out mainly in the fields of antiquities and history.

The antiquities of India were certain to become one of the first objects of attention to the members of the Asiatic Society. They possess the twofold advantage of appealing to the natural curiosity of man and furnishing an incentive to the speculation of the learned. Their importance with regards to the elucidation of history was well described by Colebrooke in an earlier volume of the *Asiatic Researches* : "In the scarcity of authentic materials", he writes, "for the ancient, and even for the modern, history of the Hindu race, importance is justly attached to all genuine monuments; and especially inscriptions on stone and metal, which are occasionally discovered through various accidents. If these be carefully preserved and diligently

examined, and the facts ascertained from them by judiciously employed towards elucidating the scattered information, which can be yet collected from the remains of Indian literature, a satisfactory progress may be finally made investigating the history of the Hindus."

Within a decade of its foundation, we gather from the records, the Society's attention to the famed monuments and ruins of antiquity at various ancient places of India, viz : Sarnath Budha Gaya, Delhi, Mahavalipuram and various other sites having historical value. The work done by the Society mainly through the cooperation of investigators not directly associated with it and sometimes with the help of the members of the Society yielded satisfactory results. And quite a number of wonderful specimens were thus procured.

But the most interesting and important period of the Society's activity with regard to the reading and translation of ancient inscriptions lies between the years 1834 and 1839, and is mainly connected with the name of Princep, the Society's Secretary at that time. Within the brief space of those few years, and through the labours, in the main, of one man, those great discoveries were made which form the foundation of our knowledge of the ancient art of writing, language and history of India. It is now universally admitted that we owe to the Asiatic Society in no small measure for our knowledge on ancient Indian alphabets. The decipherment of various inscriptions discovered provided with an impetus to the scholars and eventually it heralded the beginning of the Indian renaissance, relating particularly to the language and chronology of ancient India.

Another notable merit of the Asiatic Society lies in the fact that it laid the foundation for a true history of ancient India. Antecedently to the discoveries made through the researches of the Society in the antiquities of India, the history and chronology of this sub-contient down to the Mohommedan conquest was inextricable from a mist of more or less legendary tradition, a great part of which was incredible, and all of which were exaggerated or distorted both in regard to the actual

events and to the dates at which they were said to have been occurred. The only sources of which, at that time, were available to the student of Indian history were the traditions, legends and myths, which had been gradually in the course of many centuries accumulated in the great epic poems, the Puranic cyclopaedia and provincial chronicles, written for the most part in scholastic Sanskrit language by authors to whom history and fiction seem not to have appeared antagonistic. Indeed, the two most trustworthy of the provincial chronicles, the *Rajtarangini* of Kashmir and *Mahavamsa* of Ceylon, which make the nearest approach to historical narration, did not become sufficiently known, till after the first landmarks in ancient Indian history had been fixed through the discoveries of the Asiatic Society, when they rendered material assistance in filling in such details as could not be ascertained from other sources. The most important, without which indeed no history of ancient India would have been possible, are the antiquities of the country, its ancient monuments, inscriptions and coins, the discovery and interpretation of which are mainly due to the researches of the society. The chronology and history of India definitely had paved the path of our cultural renaissance and this is where lies the special importance of this learned Institution whose founder was a man with wide vision and dream.

The unsatisfactory character of the knowledge of ancient Indian history, before the discoveries occupied many pages of the earlier *transactions* of the Society itself. Belonging to the early stage of historical enquiry, are two contributions by the founder: one a "Discourse on the Hindus", published in the first volume of the *Researches* (1788), the other a memoir on "The Chronology of the Hindus" in the second volume (1790). It is interesting to note that Sir William Jones himself was not unconscious of the unsatisfactory character of his sources. For instance, summing up his results he confesses: "that though he has given sketch of Indian history through the longest period fairly, assignable to it, and has traced the foundation of the Indian Empire above three thousand eight years from the present time, still, on a subject in itself so obscure and so much clouded by the fictions of the Brahmans, who, to aggrandize themselves, have designedly

raised their antiquity beyond the truth, we must be satisfied with probable conjecture and just reasoning from the best attainable data; nor can we hope for a system of Indian chronology to which no objection can be made, unless the astronomical books in Sanskrit shall yield their exceptional evidence.

Shortly afterwards some of this expected astronomical evidence was made available to Sir William Jones. On a careful consideration of it, he came to the conclusion, which he published in 1790 in a supplementary memoir, and which is still substantially correct, "that the dawn of the true Indian history appears only three or four centuries before the Christian Era, the preceding ages being clouded by allegory or fable. Subsequent discoveries made in the antiquities of India threw of a flood of light on India's ancient history. In the words of R.C. Dutt, "We owe to the Asiatic Society as well as to its great founder for our basic and precise knowledge of ancient Indian history. "General Cunningham's Archaeological reports have also contributed considerably to construct the chronological and dynastic tables of our ancient history. Similarly, Ferguson and Vincent Smith have also provided us with an authentic account of the earliest Kingdoms of the Indian middle ages. And it is a fact that all of them were more or less inspired by the ideas of the Asiatic Society.

Next to the classical countries of Greece and Rome, there is none which has rendered more important services to the science of philosophy than India. It has presented that science, both with a new classical literature, almost unbounded in its wealth, and with a new system which by its comparative methods has gone far to revolutionise the science altogether. It has achieved this great result through its ancient language, the Sanskrit, and it has fallen to the proud lot of the Asiatic Society of Bengal to contribute the first step to its accomplishment. When in 1789, Sir William Jones, published his translation of the Sanskrit drama *Sakuntala*, it was the starting point of Sanskrit philology. Professor Max Mueller himself has admitted this fact in his *History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*.

Besides the Sanskrit language, there were current in ancient India another class of languages, or dialects, of a more vernacular type and designated collectively by the name of Prakrit. It was customary with the Hindu dramatic writers to introduce specimens of these Prakrit languages into their plays. Hence it came to pass that the existence of them became known to the European world almost as early as that of the classical Sanskrit itself, for the ancient poetical literature of India was one of the earliest that attracted the attention of European enquiries. In Jones's translation of ***Sakuntala***, the Prakrit language is already noticed in 1789. Colebrooke, Barnouf and other orientalists also made systematic research on Prakrit and the pages of the earlier issues of the ***Journal*** abound with their valuable findings,

The Asiatic Society, true to its name, did not limit its philological researches to the languages of India, or of countries nearly connected with India. Those of countries, more or less distant in geographical position or historical relations, like China, Armenia, Turkistan, also received an occasional notice. Thus, in the second volume of the ***Researches*** of the year 1790 Sir William Jones published some account of the second classical book of Chinese, the ***Shi-Kins***, containing three hundred odes or short poems in praise of ancient sovereign and legislators, or descriptive of ancient manners.

Now about the scientific studies initiated by this august body. Being one of the oldest scientific institution in the world and the second oldest in the east, the Asiatic Society may be said to have initiated scientific researches in India on western lines. The Society's ***Transactions*** and ***Journal*** constituted the principal channels of communication for studies in mathematical and physical sciences (including meteorology, tidal observations, laws of storms, electrical researches, etc) geology and in mineralogy, zoology, botany, geography, ethnology, chemistry, etc. The Centenary Volume of the Society summerises the activities of the Society in scientific researches and the ***Journal*** and ***Memoirs*** published since then, continue the tradition already established. Every branch of scientific activity owed its start

to the Asiatic Society which had made important and valuable contributions in every field.

For long years the Asiatic Society had advised the government on matters of scientific interest and it may justly be said that it was the initial activities of the Asiatic Society in different branches of sciences that lay at the root of the foundation, by the government of India, of the different scientific surveys : for instance, the Trigonometrical Survey of India in 1818, the Geological Survey of India in 1851, Indian Metereological Department in 1875, Zoological Survey of India in 1911, Botanical Survey of India in 1912, etc. The Society still maintains cordial and co-operative relations with these surveys.

Again, it goes to the credit of the Asiatic Society that it started and initiated investigations, on modern lines, on every aspect of humanistic studies in India. In the field of language, literature and philology it has made the most important contributions, so also in history, art and archaeology, in epigraphy, palaeography and numismatics, in religion, philosophy and folklore etc. The Society started epigraphical and palaeographical studies and such studies became surely founded by the decipherment of the Brahmi script by James Princep in 1837 at the Asiatic Society. The Numismatic Society of India owes its birth to the members of the Asiatic Society, so also the all India Numismatic Conference. True to the aims and ideals set up by the founder the Society left no field unexplored and it may be truly said that for studies in various branches of Indology and Asiatic lore the Asiatic Society still occupies the position of the premier Research Institution in the East.

The Asiatic Society was responsible for creating an interest in the culture and wisdom of the East, all over Europe, and in a way it may claim to be the real mother of all orientalistic associations which were started during the first half of the nineteenth century in Europe. The account given here, brief as it is, speaks of achievements which, it is hoped, will continue to further the cause of advanced studies and research, true to its objects and to the tradition that it has established during

two hundered years of its existence. A new epoch and a new orientation in the enlargement of culture and mind of modern man and also a transformation in the attitude of human civilisation is the rich legacy bequeathed by the Asiatic Society and its illustrious founder.